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'Wings of Gold' failed to lift game firm aloft

*By Timothy Burn December 15, 1997 Publication: The Washington Times Page: D13
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Bethesda Softworks had a very productive 1997, despite a frustrating experience trying to release a CD-ROM game in conjunction with this fall's CBS television series "Pensacola: Wings of Gold."

"That project has been moving very, very slowly," said Chris Weaver, president of the Rockville-based computer game company.

"We've found in the course of this experiment that it takes us a lot more time to develop things than it does the television industry. The transfer of information has not been as effective as one would hope."

In June, the "Wings of Gold" project was Mr. Weaver's greatest hope. Though it was just one of many games his elite staff of 75 employees was developing, he saw great marketing potential from releasing an action game tied to a nationally syndicated television show.

CBS spokeswoman Andi Sporkin said "Wings of Gold" is running successfully in 70 percent of U.S. markets, though it's not appearing in any prime-time slots.

Meanwhile, the CD-ROM game is still in production. Mr. Weaver has not written off the project entirely, but he said the marketing experiment will not likely live up to its potential.

He's chalking the project up as a valuable learning experience that, in the final analysis, cost the company little in time and resources. Regarding his company's investment in the project, he said, "We never jump from a platform we would not want to fall from."

Despite the sluggishness of the "Wings of Gold" project, Mr. Weaver said Bethesda Softworks would likely exceed 1997 revenue expectations, though he declined to offer specifics. In June, he projected revenues for 1997 to be \$25 million.

Bethesda Softworks is expanding its operations with the recent acquisition of Silver Spring-based XL Translab, a high-tech graphics company. And the company will soon open a London office, said Mr. Weaver. The expansion will bring his staff up to 80, from 75 this summer.

The company has just released another CD-ROM title, "X-Car: Experimental Racing," which allows gamers to simulate testing prototype racing cars.

"You can move these cars at 300 mph, and there are no police in this simulator," Mr. Weaver said enthusiastically.

Also in the works is a similar game, "Hot Rod Presents: Burnout Championship Drag Racing," and next year Bethesda Softworks will release "PBA Bowling II," an upgraded version of the popular "PBA Bowling" game. The company next year will also come out with "Tenth Planet," an advanced technology CD-ROM strategy game.

COMPANY: Bethesda Softworks

BUSINESS: Software game publishing

FOUNDER: Chris Weaver

LOCATION: Rockville

EMPLOYEES: 75

INITIAL INVESTMENT: \$50,000

PROJECTED 1997 REVENUES IN JUNE: \$25 million

ESTIMATED 1997 REVENUES NOW: Would not specify

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